I. Mingus

Mingus, Aleksandar Hemon writes, is the imaginary friend of his daughter Ella. Mingus is Ella’s brother, at times her ally and at times her enemy, but always her companion. Hemon has come to understand that his little daughter externalizes her feelings through Mingus, “processing through her imaginary brother” that which is difficult for her to understand (“Aquarium” 233). Ella questions and Mingus answers. Hemon witnesses the dynamic and recognizes his daughter’s system as “exactly” what he has been “doing as a writer all these years,” his characters answering many of his questions through fiction (233). However, I can’t help but turn in another direction.

Dear Hemon, it seems to me that *The Book of My Lives* is your collection of Minguses.

It seems to me, in fact, that the stratification of Hemon’s life into *lives* in each of his essays is a way of bringing his own imaginary friends into being. Just as he “cooked up those avatars,” who then “acted upon” his own feelings in his novels, Hemon made himself into a number of different characters, so that even in his nonfiction he is not *himself* (233). By encapsulating his past selves in earlier moments of his life, Hemon extracts himself from them; he stops viewing his past selves as part of who he *is* in this time and place, “at the time of writing,” and instead views his long gone identities as external to him—imaginary friends whom he can observe from a distance and try to understand (“Others” 24). His Minguses help Hemon wander the depths of his own memory, analyzing his past in the space of his narrative.

So, dear Hemon, you question, and another Hemon answers.
II. Hemon-Brother

The first Hemon I encounter as I open the book of his lives is a Hemon who had just become a brother. The arrival of Kristina, his little sister, “marked the beginning of a tormentful, lonely period” when this Hemon first understood that he had to realign himself to the new conditions of membership in his family (“Others” 4). Kristina’s birth redefined the parameters within which he had constructed the first understanding of who he was. Not only had his own role changed within his home; so too had the roles of his parents, whose devotion ceased to be monopolized by him: “The world had harmoniously belonged to me . . . the world had pretty much been me” (4). Though present-day Hemon seems to disapprove of the Hemon-Brother who struggled to accept his sister into his life, it is through isolating and studying this part of his identity that the author realizes that he “can observe” himself “from outside” (7). Hemon’s ability to look at this part of himself as an outsider enables him to judge, to recognize faults in, and to further understand the logic of his other selves.

In a way, then, Hemon-Brother might function as an epigraph to all the other Hemons we encounter in The Book of My Lives. As one of Hemon’s “earliest memories,” Hemon-Brother’s reaction to his sister’s birth reveals how the act of writing allows the author to utilize his “narrative space to extend” himself, shaping the different forms he finds in his memory to throw his “metaphysical tantrums” (“Others” 7, “Aquarium” 233). But a single epigraph—this first Hemon I encounter—cannot adequately serve to encompass all of the author’s other selves. The work, or rather Hemon himself, turns far more multidimensional: the Hemon-Brother that resides in Hemon’s memory exists at the same time as present-day Hemon, but in a universe that is now long gone to the author. Encountering Hemon-Brother lets Hemon—and the reader—understand how his writing turns into a processing system—much like the one shared between Ella and Mingus—in which Hemon’s memories form not an account of the past but a discussion, an opportunity to face the people he has ceased to be.

Hemon uses Hemon-Brother to introduce one of the main catalysts of the separation of his many lives: his displacement. His sister’s birth is not a
physical displacement, but rather a familial one, indicating that Hemon’s identity would forever have a shifting definition.

III. Hemon-Outsider

Hemon, who left Sarajevo for Chicago in 1992 just as war was about to explode in Bosnia, now faces a displaced Hemon, a Hemon stranded far from home and pushed to confront “the ontological crisis” of “being forced to negotiate the conditions of [his] selfhood under [the] perpetually changing existential circumstances” of an unknown place (“Others” 17). This Hemon-Outsider can no longer revel “in the space of fuck-you-ness” he had “carved out” for himself as a young man. His displacement replaces his previous “high with being young and radical” with the ever-present fear of the unknown (“Wartime” 52). Hemon-Outsider, who used to be full of “ideas and plans and hopes so big” that he thought he could change the world, must deal with the construction of an identity in a completely new place while also facing the loss of the place where he grew up, the place that was him, now destroyed by the terror of war (“Kauders” 42). Hemon seems to intuit that all the selves he inhabited before emigrating—Hemon-Bosnian, Hemon-Brother, Hemon-Revolutionary—would also be destroyed—or at least disfigured—along with his home. Hemon’s confrontation with Hemon-Outsider allows him to come to terms with shedding the “revolutionary fantasies” of his youth as his external circumstances threatened the constitution of his then-identity (43).

Though Hemon, like most of us, faced change throughout his life, leaving Sarajevo was perhaps what destabilized him the most; away from the city where he was “physically and metaphysically” “placed,” Hemon-Outsider starts to realize that his “interiority was inseparable” from his “exteriority,” and reminds himself of the intricate relationship between the physical and the psychological (“Flaneur” 138). The story of Hemon-Outsider allows Hemon to discover that his “deepest identity” is determined by his “position in a human network” (145). Hemon watches as yet another of his imaginary friends, Hemon-Bosnian, slowly turns into Hemon-Outsider, who struggles at every moment to realign his identity with the “human network” of Chicago (145). Aside from negotiating the repositioning of his ideology,
beliefs, and dreams, Hemon- Outsider must shift himself to fit into the
dynamics of his new home.

IV. Hemon-Chicagoan

Hemon writes that, ultimately, “converting Chicago” into his personal
space “became not just metaphysically essential but psychiatrically urgent”
(“Flaneur” 151). Hemon- Outsider sought to embrace every way in which his
self could adapt to match the circumstances of his new home. Hemon now
writes in English because he belongs to Chicago, because “parts of Chicago
had entered” him, so that his “immigrant interior” merged with the
“American exterior” of his new home (155). His adapted self, a Hemon-
Chicagoan, now seeks to be expressed in the language of his adopted place.
Hemon writes in English, indeed, because he no longer is Hemon-Bosnian,
or even Hemon- Outsider: he is now part of the human network of Chicago,
as Chicago is a part of his being. Writing in his old Bosnian would contradict
the identity he has constructed within the new borders of his life in the
United States.

V. Hemon-Father

Hemon did speak a little Bosnian from time to time, but only for his
younger daughter, Isabel, as he softly sang her to sleep with a Mozart lullaby
that he had learned as a child and still “miraculously remembered”
(“Aquarium” 214). His role as a father overrode everything else he ever was
or would be, transcending language, time, place, and every single one of his
Hemon-selves. When, at nine months old, Isabel was diagnosed with a brain
tumor— “a freak occurring in only 3 out of 1,000,000 children”— every other
Hemon completely disappeared, leaving only Hemon-Father to face “the
horrifying dimness of possibilities” of his daughter’s illness (217, 215).

Isabel’s condition paralyzed Hemon as a writer, and during the few
months after her diagnosis he found that he “could not write a story that
would help” him comprehend what was happening (234). The “hard reality”
of his family’s situation “suspended” his imagination, and he was forced to
live only inside “the domain of the unimaginable and incomprehensible”
Hemon understood that “managing knowledge and imagination”—the knowledge of the doctor’s dire statistics, the tormenting prospect of a future without Isabel—was the only way of not losing his mind (217).

Though Hemon found his writer-self momentarily frozen during his daughter’s treatment, it inevitably returned, allowing him to externalize Hemon-Father. But unlike his relationship with his other Hemons, Hemon cannot interact with Hemon-Father in the same critical, nearly objective and somewhat contemptuous manner, perhaps because Hemon-Father is not at all an imaginary friend. Rather, Hemon-Father occupies every inch of Hemon’s reality, appearing in his writing only because Hemon is still trying to understand this part of his identity. Living “inside a void that could be filled only by Isabel’s presence,” Hemon finds himself, as a writer, questioning and seeking to understand Hemon-Father (239). It seems, now, that Hemon is inextricable from Hemon-Father, as both of them, heartbroken, can’t do anything but honor and love Isabel’s beautiful life.

It was during this time that Ella, Isabel’s big sister, first met her friend Mingus.

VI. Hemon-Writer

Hemon’s “narrative space,” extended into *The Book of My Lives*, contains only one version of himself, one imaginary friend who exists throughout the entire collection and in each of his essays: the Hemon-Writer (“Aquarium” 233). Hemon-Writer is ubiquitous as a narrator characterized by easy sarcasm and almost tactile imagery, but most importantly, he is ever-present in the text because he is at almost all times conscious that he is present. Whether Hemon is encountering the story of Hemon-Chicagoan, Hemon-Bosnian, Hemon- Outsider, or any other version of himself, the act of writing allows him to best reflect on the interconnectedness of his many selves.

Though Hemon claims he thinks of himself as a writer “only at the time of writing,” it seems obvious to me that Hemon-Writer is the version of himself that is truest and most self-reflective, so much so that I would dare to say that Hemon-Writer and Hemon himself are synonymous (“Others” 24). Hemon-Writer exists in the present as he dives into memory to meet all other Hemons. There is some of Hemon-Writer in every person Hemon
used to be: he was a writer in his hometown of Sarajevo, and then a writer as he traveled to Chicago; he was a writer when young, and he is a writer now. Hemon-Writer has learned to adapt to the circumstances of every Hemon, from the Hemon who “wrote self-pitying poetry” in his youth, to the Hemon who “wrote stuff full of madness, death, and whimsical wordplay” as he tried to figure himself out (“Kauders” 47, “Magic” 70). Hemon-Writer becomes the way in which Hemon is able to move across time and place within the structure of his writing, turning into his own best literary device. As Hemon-Writer studies his many selves, delving into his past from the outside in, the author can’t help but interact with his Minguses, doing through Hemon-Writer what Hemon claims he “could not” or would not do if not for the act of writing (“Aquarium” 234).

Hemon’s “others”—his past selves—allow him to “process the world by telling stories,” producing “human knowledge” through his “engagement with imagined selves” (234). Writing, then, becomes the way in which Hemon can externalize his memories, replaying the lives that are long gone but are still not completely understood. His narrative imagination produces dimensions in which he can debate with his Hemon-Others, leaving a place where they can continue to exist even as he starts to understand them and move away from them. His writing, then, through each of his Hemons, is not only the extension of himself and who he used to be, but also the extension of memory, love, and time: it offers the comfort of reckoning with and understanding lives lived and left behind, and the potential to shape and create lives yet to be lived.

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WORKS CITED

  “The Kauders Case.” 41-60.